A Continent Apart:
Kosovo, Africa and
Humanitarian Intervention

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Front cover picture: Photo by Hazir Reka © Reuters, 1999
Several ethnic Albanians wait on the bridge in the divided town of Kosovska Mitrovica to cross to the other part of the town which is controlled by the Serbs, October 5. Kosovska Mitrovica, 40 kms north of the provincial capital of Pristina, has been divided into two parts ever since the NATO-led peacekeeping force was deployed in the area.

Back cover picture: Photo by STR © Reuters, 2000
Residents of Kisangani, Democratic Republic of Congo, walk past a dead Ugandan soldier, June 11, in the city’s Tshanga suburb. Rwandan and Ugandan troops fought over the city for six days before calm returned.
Preface

In a world sadly inured to incidents of gross human rights violations, and accustomed to the various reactions of righteous governments and hamstrung international organisations, it is seldom that a single event should spark worldwide debate and polarise international opinion. The March 1999 NATO military intervention in Kosovo in response to serious human rights violations was one of those rare occurrences. Although it generated fierce disputes among political figures, and heated polemic in academic circles, it was clear that the events in Kosovo ushered in a sea-change in the arena of humanitarian intervention. The nature and legitimacy of that change was, for the most part, shrouded in partiality and emotiveness.

In July 1999, the Swedish Prime Minister, Goran Persson, raised with a number of heads of state his increasing concern about the absence of objective debate over the military intervention. With their encouragement, and the support of his own government, he established the Independent International Commission on Kosovo. The extent of Sweden’s involvement was to provide financial resources for the Commission and to appoint the chairperson and co-chairperson. With the support of the President of the South African Constitutional Court and the South African government, I accepted the invitation to chair the Commission, with Mr Carl Tham as the co-chair. Mr Tham, a leading Swedish politician, is the Secretary-General of the Olof Palme International Centre in Stockholm.

Mr Tham and I were free to constitute the Commission and, in turn the Commission was free to determine its own mandate and terms of reference. This was the first truly independent commission established to investigate this kind of international phenomenon. We invited eleven experts from ten countries to join the Commission.

The Commission held five plenary sessions in Stockholm, New York, Budapest, Florence and Johannesburg. Associated with three of the meetings we had the benefit of international seminars in which experts discussed questions relevant to the work of the Commission. The last such seminar was convened at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg by the South African Institute of International Affairs, and the Law School and Department of International Relations of the University. The Ford Foundation generously made funds available to enable experts to be invited from a number of African countries.
The Commission was aware of the concern in the developing world arising from the NATO intervention without the prior consent of the Security Council of the United Nations. The concern related specifically to the legality of the intervention and its precedential consequences. It was therefore considered important to have a meeting of the Commission and a seminar in Africa. The Commission was delighted with the outstanding seminar that was held in Johannesburg. Its timing was important as the report of the Commission was finalised in the days following the seminar and many aspects of the discussions are reflected in that report. Former President Nelson Mandela delivered the opening address at the seminar and we were honoured when he agreed to it being used as the introduction to the report of the Commission. It also appears in this publication. The Commission’s report was handed to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Mr Kofi Annan, on 23 October 2000.

The report of the Commission has resulted in much interest and debate in many capitals and especially in Europe and North America. Numerous seminars and conferences have been held at which the report’s discussion and recommendations have been the central focus. This interest has led to the life of the Commission being extended from the end of December 2000 to the end of September 2001. Another meeting of the Commission is planned for September 2001 in Stockholm. At that meeting the recommendations of the Commission will be reassessed in the light of developments in the Balkans since the report was written and, in particular, the consequences of the accession to office of President Kostunica.

Another consequence of the interest in the work of the Commission has been the establishment of a successor independent commission by the government of Canada. The International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty will look at the issues in relation to all forms of international intervention and their relationship to the sovereignty of nations.

It is my hope that this reflects an important new development in the international community—the use of independent commissions to look into and judge the performance of governments and international organisations. This development, with its resonances of globalisation and of today’s shrinking borders, is most important if the growing acceptance of the need for the international community to safeguard human rights is to become entrenched. It is also crucial for the emergence of a much needed sense of international accountability and justice.

It is an important new development that independent commissions are looking into and judging the performance of governments and international organisations. It is a consequence of shrinking borders, globalisation and, above all, the growing acceptance that human rights violations are no longer only the business of oppressive governments but of the whole international community.

I can do no better than to end this preface by emphasising the words of Nelson Mandela:

We speak here today to support the Kosovo Commission as potentially a powerful means of promoting and consolidating that sense of one-ness amongst ourselves. As we learn to understand that destructive part of our human condition that has caused so much pain and suffering throughout our human history, we may advance in the knowledge that we share so much—bad and good. Together, and only together, can we make of the world a better place for our children to grow up in.

This book contains the outstanding papers which were presented at the Johannesburg seminar and I am grateful to the South African Institute of International Affairs for making it possible to have them reach the wider audience they deserve.

Justice Richard Goldstone
Constitutional Court of South Africa
March 2001
rooted in the local context, civil society can adopt a long-term approach that combines attention to structural concerns with relationship building, enhances public participation and ownership, and builds local capacity. Its role in this regard has a strong facilitative nature, which allows it to draw in society at large and build on local ideas and initiatives. The nature of contemporary armed conflict in Africa may contribute to an enhanced role for civil society in processes of conflict prevention and transformation because current intrastate crises have features that are problematic for international agencies and governmental actors. In addition, conventional approaches to conflict have paid insufficient attention to the structural conditions that lie at the root of internal conflicts, focusing instead on more outward manifestations of political, social, economic and cultural tensions. They also disregard the psycho-political dimensions of protracted social conflict, which, if not addressed, may undermine efforts to conflict prevention. Civil society may have some comparative advantages in dealing with violent conflict. Further in-depth, empirical research is required to expand our knowledge and understanding of ways in which civil society has intervened in various cases and the degree of success achieved.

Conflict is inevitable in diverse societies, but it is not necessarily destructive. Conflict can be dealt with in an effective manner if structural fault-lines in societies are rectified or at least mitigated, through promoting good governance, political pluralism, respect for human rights, accommodating diversity, and ensuring a fair distribution of economic resources and opportunities. For any efforts towards conflict prevention to be sustainable, they must be undertaken at different levels within a long-term approach and with local relevance. Approaches to peacebuilding must also be coherent, comprehensive and integrated. It is axiomatic that the first responsibility for mitigating and addressing conflicts in Africa should lie with Africans. Civil society can make a vital contribution in this regard.

The Role of Mass Communications in Preventing Conflict

George William Lugalambi

Introduction

When a society's collective psyche is saturated with the realities of conflict in all their violent manifestations, the threshold of moral outrage tends to be cast so high that it becomes elusive. This is a grave problem for societies seasoned by conflict, because it takes extraordinary violence to stir outrage. And in the absence of apparent public outrage, the power elite and the protagonists in a conflict often find ready excuses to refrain from action that would unsettle their political agendas or bring them under scrutiny.

For instance, David Westbrook reveals in his study of the northern Ugandan conflict between President Yoweri Museveni's government and Joseph Kony's so-called Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) that one reason the 1994 peace talks collapsed was 'because of a political wrangle over whom should receive the credit.' There is concern about the way journalists position themselves in the face of such cynical behaviour, and about the attitudes newspapers adopt towards political pathologies of this kind. We know too well that the script of this particular conflict—as in other conflicts elsewhere, including those in Algeria, Angola, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia–Eritrea, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and

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1. GEORGE WILLIAM LUGALAMBI is a lecturer in the Department of Mass Communication, Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda and editor of the Uganda Journalism Review.
3. According to Westbrook's source, some influential figures in Museveni's government did not want Betty Bigombe, the minister responsible then for pacification of northern Uganda, to be 'the one to bring home the head of the elephant.'
Social foundations of journalism

The drift of this discussion can be stated here as a very basic proposition: all journalistic practices and ideals ought to be inspired by some social purpose. Without such purpose, journalists are prone to suffer from a moral bankruptcy. They are dispossessed of the moral authority to harness public outrage over the deadly conflicts that the political class often does not try hard enough, if at all, to prevent.

There is a danger that journalism will degenerate into a sterile enterprise if the focus on its social justification is lost. The industrialisation of news has come with an entirely different repertoire of concepts, techniques and motivations for journalism. For any occurrence to qualify for the media's attention, it generally must submit to the basic test of news. Is it dramatic? Is it sensational? Does it lend itself to juicy, snappy headlines? Does it have visual appeal? It cannot be disputed that journalism that meets this test attracts audiences. But the question is: Must the story end with 'the' story? This is the point where the relevance of journalism as a social project is to be sought and defended.

The earlier reference to political agendas needs to be underlined at this point. Scholars at New York University's Centre for War, Peace and the News Media have constructed out of the theory of conflict a blueprint for what Rob Manoff describes as roles the media 'can and must play' in preventing and managing conflict:

- channelling communication between parties;
- educating;
- confidence building;
- countering perceptions;
- analysing conflict.

Reading between the lines of this blueprint, we find that mediating conflict, whether the aim is to prevent or to resolve it, is a process that involves navigating within complex power dynamics, interests and positions. Yet things get even tougher. The motivations of the protagonists are sometimes indecipherable, as John F Clark discovered in his attempt to untangle Museveni's decision to send Ugandan troops to occupy territory in Congo. 'In estimating Museveni's motivations,' Clark said of his puzzlement, 'one can never be completely confident about what these motives were, and even the principal himself may not have been certain which considerations stimulated his bold move.'

The public interest

One of the first casualties of conflict is the loss of consensus over the public interest which, notwithstanding the vagaries of politics, is a benign and abstract phenomenon. Mass communications scholars recognise, as Denis McQuail does, that when such consensus is undermined, 'expectations concerning the proper role of the mass media are often unclear and divergent'.

For example, the political establishment expects the media to propagate the government line and to promote the interests of the state and its authorities.

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7 It is difficult to attach specific, accurate meaning to the concept of 'public interest'. Even the International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences says it is an 'elastic and relative' concept. Nevertheless, public interest 'assumes the existence of a common interest, although specific manifestations cannot be agreed upon.' This is the very sense in which the concept is employed here.
Critical journalists do not see government and state interests as necessarily the same, and making a distinction between the two is not a matter of splitting hairs, as the pre-establishment intelligentsia would like us to believe. Nobody can make an exclusive claim to the state. Unlike the government, the state belongs to everybody. In between the government and state interests lies the 'national interest'. The national interest itself is often the site of furious contest between government and civil society. From this contest emerge the various manifestations of a society's lack of consensus over the public interest which, in spite of the fluidity of the concept, should be relatively stable and clear.

In a free society, or in a society with pretensions to democracy, the media are expected constantly to monitor the centres of power and to be critical of the exercise of political power. Yet, at the same time, certain principles highly cherished by the media usually bring journalists on to a collision course with the establishment and with those whose values are dominant. One could cite principles such as freedom of expression, access to sources, information and communication channels, diversity (of opinions represented), and objectivity (in reporting news and views).

**Conflicts in Africa**

In Uganda, the insurgency triggered by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), a Christian fundamentalist rebel group, has baited the country for over a decade. The motives of the LRA are obscure. With the backing of the regime in Khartoum, Sudan, the LRA has invaded upon the people of northern Uganda to terror that leaves Idi Amin's excesses a pale comparison. Abducting children, forcing minors to kill, and cutting off innocent civilians' limbs, ears and limbs are examples of their crimes against humanity. Uganda pays Khartoum back in its own currency by supporting the Sudanese People's Liberation Army. And so the blood flows on.

While all this happens, the Ugandan and Sudanese governments remain intransigent, against the current of public and international opinion. Each side prefers to reply to terror with terror. In fact, in 1991 the Ugandan government mounted its so-called Operation North. In four months (April to July), the military pursued a virtual scorched-earth strategy in a vain attempt to rid the region of insurgents. So brutal were the military's tactics that they entrenched the suspicion felt by the population towards the government, and fuelled the violence.

Although Kampala insisted initially that it could not negotiate with the insurgents, it finally capitulated. During this period there were those in the media who argued for negotiations. The government branded them rebel sympathisers. Sections of the media, who highlighted the actions of the rebels, were in effect mocking the government's capacity to keep the country secure from insurgents. By the time the government began negotiations it was already encumbered with a credibility problem.

This is why Heike Behrend concludes, after a consideration of Uganda's political history, that contrary to classical thought, which expects the state to limit violence, in Uganda 'it has increasingly itself become an instrument of violent retaliation'. Similarly, in his examination of the nature of violence in Uganda, ABK Kasozi argues that violence has been institutionalised by leaders, who characteristically rely on it to preserve their hold on state power. Consequently, violence has come to be accepted as a mechanism for targeting political goals and settling political conflicts.

Besides, from a wider perspective, John Stremlau traces the origins of most wars on the African continent to more immediate problems of governance. To be sure, the dismal democratic performance of most African states makes the continent doubly susceptible to conflict, as Stremlau succinctly explains: 'Weak, authoritarian African governments lack the institutional capacity to manage factional struggles. They exclude majority or minority groups from power and suffer from poverty and gross income inequality. All of these tensions throw off sparks that can start a war.'

Moreover, despite full awareness of the potential for catastrophe arising out of scenarios such as those Stremlau describes above, the international community lacks the 'moral will and authority' to undertake preventive intervention in Africa. Take the case of Rwanda, where the signs of an impending genocide were unmistakable. However, Rwanda had no chance of being saved because, in the words of Padraig O'Malley, 'the resolution of

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8 Kasozi, ibid., cites many factors as causes of violence in Uganda: social inequality; states and ethnic groups; flimsy mechanisms for conflict resolution; ethnic and religious factionalism; absence of an indigenous property-owning class; decrease in national production; parochial, weak, and poorly educated leaders; the language problem, pp.6-11.
today's civil wars hinges on a grim cost-benefit calculation that deeply discounts those without marketable resources.\footnote{O'Malley, op. cit., p.240.}

O'Malley deplores the propensity of rich nations to marginalise poor ones, and the tendency of the international community to prescribe preventive intervention on ideological and market share principles.

Conflict seen through a media prism

From a media point of view, most of the violent conflicts in Africa have features that are typical of conflicts McQuail has observed elsewhere, such as in Vietnam, Falklands, Lebanon, Grenada, and the Gulf. These conflicts have given rise to situations where free media have been exposed to severe strains.\footnote{Ibid., p.241.} And out of these strains McQuail has assembled a framework through which the relationship between conflict and the media can be understood:\footnote{Knightley, P., 'No more heroes: War correspondents retreat from the frontline', IPI Report, First Quarter, 2000, p.10.}

- A vital national interest, as determined by the government of the day, is at stake, involving matters of life and death and of national prestige.
- A significant degree of controversy about the legitimacy of state action is present.
- A strong interest is shown by the authorities in managing the flow of information and in keeping some matters secret.
- The events have high salience and there is considerable public interest and demand for news (hence a potential conflict with the interest of authorities).
- Immediate consequences are felt outside the national territory and by non-participants, so that world attention is also involved.

The 1999 Balkan conflict between NATO and Serbia over ethnic cleansing in Kosovo and the war for secession in Chechnya illustrate some of these issues. In his analysis of the fate of war reporting in the aftermath of Kosovo and during the crisis in Chechnya, Phillip Knightley found evidence of calculated and cynical management of news by both militaries and governments.\footnote{Knightley, P., 'No more heroes: War correspondents retreat from the frontline', IPI Report, First Quarter, 2000, p.10.}

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The lies, manipulation, propaganda, spin, distortion, omissions, slant and gullibility of the coverage of Kosovo and Chechnya, so soon after the media debacle in the Gulf, has brought war correspondents to crisis point in their short history. Their role has never been more insecure. What are war correspondents for? What is expected of them? Who still believes them?

Journalism with a social purpose

The 'amoral calculus', as O'Malley puts it, may have become standard operating procedure for international response to conflicts such as we see in Africa. Overturining it is journalism's moral imperative. Here we return to our basic proposition that journalism should be imbued with a social purpose.

All journalism is socially circumscribed by the cultural, political, economic and temporal contexts in which it thrives. The case of Uganda is instructive here. Some journalists have taken a stance against the government's approach to dealing with conflict. These journalists are aware, much to the chagrin of the government, that the conflict cannot end if the public is not outraged by the excesses of the protagonists: So journalists have made a point of reporting in graphic detail every episode of violence that occurs as a result of armed conflict, irrespective of the perpetrator—government or rebel.

Only an outraged public can prevail upon its leaders to take serious action to stem conflict. Journalists have paid a price. Some have been branded unpatriotic because they criticise the military. They have been accused of betraying the national interest because they question the country's belligerent policies and attitudes towards its neighbours and its own people. But the national interest is not to be identified with the interests of any of the factions party to the conflict. Those who aim to take or retain control of the public agenda are invariably wary of alternative formulations of the national interest.

Journalists in Uganda protested against the country's military intervention in Congo, which they saw as misconceived. Out came the patriotic police again, singling out for criticism those in the media who objected to engaging the country in what had always looked like, and indeed ended up, as a military misadventure and, to government critics, a mission to plunder.

Objectivity contested

Situations of conflict by their very nature provoke profound passions. What do American journalists think when they see the bodies of American soldiers
being dragged in the streets of Mogadishu? What does Ugandan journalist Aliro Ogen think after helping to exhume, identify and rebury in mass graves bodies of Ugandan soldiers killed in clashes with Rwandan troops in Kisangani, Congo?\footnote{John Kevin Aliro Ogen, a journalist and columnist with The Monitor in Kampala, has written extensively about the involvement of Uganda and Rwanda in the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo. At a debate organised in Kampala by the National Institute of Journalists of Uganda on ‘The Role of the Media in Armed Conflict’, on 9 July 2000, he talked about his experience in Congo while covering the clashes between Rwanda and Ugandan troops in the Congo-ville town of Kisangani.}

It becomes clear that the practice of journalism ought to be built on an ideological template not necessarily informed by received wisdom. Many journalists do not want to acknowledge the academic debate that questions the assumptions that undergird their work. The fact that journalists are under pressure to resist flitting with partisan interests should not preclude them from propagating popular social agendas. A case in point are those agendas informed by basic moral instincts, as exemplified by the efforts of the London-based Kacoke Madit,\footnote{Kacoke Madit (KM) is a Luo expression for ‘big meeting’. KM is a peace initiative founded in 1996 by members of the Acholi diaspora. Acholiand in northern Uganda is the epicentre of the longest-running armed conflict in the country. ‘The work of KM’, according to Conciliation Resources Annual Report, 1999, ‘is based on supporting an inclusive dialogue process, combining peace education initiatives with the diaspora with efforts to practically support and enhance peace initiatives situated in Acholiand.’ p.14.} a civil society peace movement for northern Uganda, which advocates a political settlement to the conflict in this region.

Clifford G Christianis, John P Ferre, and P Mark Fackler have put this issue in its proper context: \footnote{Christiansa CG, Ferre JP & PM Fackler, Good News: Social Ethics and the Press. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, p 119.} ‘To be human is, in part, to value; thus the quest for systematic disinterest and disengagement is more akin to pathology than to quality understanding. It signifies moral indifference and disguises the observer’s motivations under the prestige of the white lab coat.’

No wonder contemporary radical discourses on the media’s involvement with conflict largely endorse an uncharitable view of journalism’s core paradigm, that is, a narrative order and an ideological commitment to objectivity. To delineate the role of mass communications in preventing conflict, the analytical option preferred here is to locate this within the context of current media debates. In these debates, the criterion of objectivity (meaning disinterestedness) is challenged.

Immanuel Kant’s notion of reality as being socially constructed suggests our politics or, generally, our ideologies. This thinking has similarly bred an production and exchange of meaning.\footnote{Flake J., Introduction to Communication Studies. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 1990.} They contend that meaning is not frameworks of those who receive the messages. Journalists therefore cannot live. The news they report reflects particular perspectives of the world. To take as Robert W McChesney says, that ‘professionalism in journalism is in terms of this reasoning, a lack of objectivity makes journalism unprofessional.’

Those who still hang on to their belief in objectivity see it not so much as an ideal but as a method, a standard of judgement. The arguments of Judith Lichtenberg on the subject are compelling: \footnote{McChesney RW, Rich Media Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999, p.7.} ‘It is rare, in the quick-and-messy world that journalists cover, that these standards and practices enable us to determine the whole truth and nothing but the truth in a particular case. But it is equally rare that we have no guidance whatever.’

Lichtenberg makes a strong case for distinguishing between objectivity and neutrality, because the latter is often erroneously associated with the former. Guided by a positivist stance, she considers facts to be objective, so ‘the objective investigator will not be neutral with respect to the facts.’ \footnote{Lichtenberg J., In defense of objectivity’, in Curran J & M Gurevitch (eds), Mass Media and Society. London: Edward Arnold, 1991, p.219.}

In her criticism of the social constructionist argument, Lichtenberg situates the much-maligned notion of objectivity in a different conceptual domain.\footnote{Lichtenberg, ibid., p.229.}
The point is that it makes no sense to criticize a statement or description as biased or unobjective except against the background of some actual or possible contrast, some more accurate statement or better description. We have a variety of means to settle differences between conflicting beliefs or to establish one view as superior to another. We get more evidence, seek out other sides of the story, check our instruments, duplicate our experiments, re-examine our chain of reasoning. These methods don’t settle all questions, but they settle many.

Taking a cue from Lichtenberg’s position, we can suggest that objectivity is perhaps not a problem in itself. The question is how journalists position themselves with regard to a particular issue of media interest, particularly violent conflict. Looking at things this way, even those who are passionate about objectivity as a journalistic tenet may not have a fundamental disagreement with the idea of Hannes Siebert and Melissa Baumann.25

Instead of reporting from ‘the sidelines of conflict’, as objectivity must suggest, we’d argue that to truly understand a conflict, and to report it fairly and in all its complexity, journalists must place themselves dead centre. We don’t mean, necessarily, in the midst of the violence, but at the interface of conflict between the antagonists—where it may become clear what the conflict really means. (emphasis added)

Rigour in reporting conflict

Alan J Kuperman,26 in his analysis of the Western media’s failure to report the impending genocide in Rwanda in 1994, is aware that journalists may not be able to check their information without taking risks involving visits to the sites of violence. He contends:27 ‘But so long as reporters do not confirm the facts on the ground, they must try to do everything else possible to piece together the real story for readers—in full awareness that combatants, governments and private agencies are all trying to manipulate them.’

The interesting thing about Siebert and Baumann’s position is that, whereas they claim to be decidedly opposed to the doctrine of objectivity,

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they do not contradict Lichtenberg’s prescription for objectivity, which Kuperman refers to as piecing together the story for readers.

To all intents and purposes in this discussion, therefore, objectivity is a fairly settled matter, settled insofar as we see it more as a narrative strategy based on logical and rigorous interrogation of ‘our’ facts, as well as honest examination of our assumptions and motives, than a mechanical injunction against using our common sense.

Hence, it is possible for journalists to take a position in a conflict, even a harsh position against some of the protagonists, and still pass the test of objectivity. Objectivity in journalism is about accounting for events, issues and processes truthfully and completely. Journalism informed by some social purpose can paint in the public’s vision a perspective of reality.

Media in conflict prevention

Unpacking what the conflict really means is the essence of the media’s engagement with matters of conflict. The diversity of thinking around what is expected of the media in dealing with conflict has generated many specific ideas about the role of journalists in these situations. Abiodun Onadipe and David Lord consulted several African journalists on this question, and extracted from their suggestions four categories of roles they assigned to the media:28

- providing information that will enable people to make better decisions about how to respond to conflict;
- educating people about conflict resolution processes and options;
- providing a channel through which different parties can be heard and can communicate with each other; and
- protecting parties and the public against abuse.

Mass communications come in many forms, formats and genres. The media (as institutions and structures), journalism (as a professional ideology and practice), and news (as a language or a ‘social narrative’), together possess a unique mandate because they contribute to the moulding of a society’s perception of the world. What role then do we expect the media to play in preventing conflict? In addition to the suggestions above and others quoted earlier, there are other generic media roles to which we now turn.

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Nurturing the public interest

The public interest is represented by the minimum set of normative principles and values that a society recognises as the basis of its existence. It is a composite of the moral paradigms, political traditions, cultural conventions and belief systems that we develop and maintain for the sake of *ubuntu* (our humanness or civility). The public interest, as expressed through our ideals, supersedes even our legitimate differences in politics, culture, religion and economic orientation.

It helps when the media point out to the people that there is a fundamental alignment of values that should not be dislocated by the kind of particularistic agendas that define a lot of the conflicts in our societies. There should be sufficient political space for all people and organised interests democratically to participate in determining their destiny. There should be sufficient stability to trigger the flow of our creative juices and the latent forces of our productivity. The media can help translate the public interest into a functional phenomenon—a set of principles and values that all people can relate to, irrespective of their specific world views. Conflict clearly undermines the entire system of principles and values that keeps a society cohesive, yet vibrantly diverse.

Cultivating public consensus

When the public interest has been secured, the media could help generate consensus over a society's collective agenda. The media can nip so many conflicts in the bud by constantly prodding their audiences into forming opinions on issues that have the potential to cause conflict. Often the public becomes cynical, even in the face of clear trends towards deadly conflict. This is because people are not adequately motivated to adopt a position on an issue. The lack of motivation is itself a symptom of a deficiency of the knowledge and information which are essential for generating a society which is an active participant in matters of collective interest.

Pro-social journalism can play its part in educating the public. Such journalism does not shy away from directing its audiences on an issue. Journalism of this nature eschews mechanical objectivity—a notion of objectivity that is usually bandied about in the form of an injunction against advocating any specific perspective on 'reality'. To deal with public cynicism towards developments that portend conflict necessitates the dynamic application of journalism as an intervention in its own right. The chances of preventing conflict are higher when the public pronounces its position clearly on an issue of collective concern.

Feeling the pulse of public opinion

One of the sharpest criticisms levelled against politicians in Africa is that they are largely insensitive to public opinion, and even more so if it is expressed through the media. Those in power seem to think that as long as people have not noted over an issue, there is no reason to believe that they are discontented or that what they think really matters. It is true that the mechanisms for measuring public opinion are underdeveloped in most of our media systems in Africa. The use of regular opinion polls is emerging in relatively few countries. In the absence of scientific and time-tested approaches to sampling public opinion, the media is hard pressed to prove that the views they represent are relevant. Many politicians in Africa are contemptuous of the public, and they reserve as much contempt for the media.

The media gives rich expression to the public conscience, especially where societies beleaguered by intractable conflicts are not active in politically productive ways. The media can help to prevent conflict by providing opportunities (especially to parties, organised interests or individuals aggrieved in one way or another) for the expression of feelings that would otherwise get bottled up.

Directing the current of public opinion

Differences can erupt into vicious conflicts when the general public does not identify with the feelings of those who disagree with the existing order. Upholders of the dominant scheme of values can easily drive upholders of minority interests to the edge. But the media can serve the larger public interest when they advocate the creation of some minimum political space in which minorities can manoeuvre and negotiate their cause. The media have

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36 Writing in a Kampala daily, columnist Peter G Mwesigye was incensed that African leaders seldom give local journalists audience, "because the (leaders) hold their own people in contempt. They do not respect public opinion and do not feel compelled or duty bound to explain national matters to the citizens. 'African leaders contemptuous of their own'? The New Vision, Tuesday, 7 December 1999, p.14.
to be assertive on this one, almost compelling the public to make concessions to those with a claim to alternative but legitimate agendas.

**Critical engagement with issues**

Prevention of conflict calls for full and meaningful disclosure of all the issues—the sticky points, the prejudices, the biases, and the fears that constitute the entire mosaic of a given conflict. It is conceivable that some people might have to be taken to task and that some egos may be injured. For journalists to engage the issues that have the potential to provoke conflict they have to do several things: interrogate the motives of those involved, examine the platforms on which they operate, search for common points of view, explore differences, and appraise positions.

The current professional conventions that journalists follow provide a footing for the desired level of critical engagement. It remains a cardinal aim to report the story in a balanced way, complete with the necessary detail, fair in its representation of the protagonists and issues, clear in its articulation of the salient points, transparent in its choice of sources, and logical in advancing a preferred position. This kind of journalism does not sit on the fence, yet it cannot be found wanting in objectivity, because rigour and openness are its currency. Any report that emerges from this process can stand up to scrutiny, and any position it advocates can be defended on the criteria of both purpose and method.

**Conclusion**

To remain indifferent to conflict is to share in the vision of its perpetrators and to perpetuate its causes. An essential antidote to conflict is a public that is not only informed about the issues involved, but one that is also angry about its occurrence and its effects. Without such conditions, those who hold power face little, if any, compulsion to tackle the roots of conflict. We have seen that seeking refuge in journalistic dogma is not a solution. Meaningful journalism consciously shapes public opinion and vigorously advances, in the public interest, the preferences of society.

**Section Three**

**Humanitarian Intervention**